

Charting Progress: SOLs Give Virginia a Head Start in Meeting New Law

Richmond Times-Dispatch

April 14, 2002

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2002 Commentary Columnist

Educators often pepper their conversations with a bewildering array of acronyms and abbreviations. When we talk about federal education law, we speak of the ESEA or NCLBA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). During the 1980's, LPT (Literacy Passport Test) entered Virginia's educational lexicon. More recently, discussions of educational policy in the commonwealth have revolved around the SOL (Standards of Learning), SOA (Standards of Accreditation), and SOQ (Standards of Quality).

Now, a new abbreviation is entering the lingo of education policy: AYP, or adequate yearly progress.

AYP describes the annual increases in student achievement in reading and mathematics required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This is the federal law that requires states, among other things, to test annually in reading and math in grades 3 through 8. The act received bipartisan support in Congress and was signed into law in January by President George W. Bush.

The law directs states to set yearly objectives for increasing achievement on state reading and math proficiency tests. These objectives must increase incrementally until 2014, when all children are expected to demonstrate proficiency in these vital subjects. The performance of students this spring on SOL tests in English and mathematics will determine the "start-line" for adequate yearly progress in Virginia.

The concept of AYP is similar to the provisional accreditation "progress benchmarks" established by the Virginia Board of Education as part of the commonwealth's existing accountability system. These incremental benchmarks describe school wide passing percentages on SOL tests in English, mathematics, science, and history. Schools in which achievement meets or exceeds these passing percentages are considered to have met the state's expectation for progress toward full accreditation.

The No Child Left Behind Act takes this concept one step further. In order to "leave no child behind," the new federal law requires schools, school divisions, and states to raise the achievement of specific groups of students.

The English and math scores of minority, economically disadvantaged, disabled, and students of limited English proficiency must all improve to the specified levels for a school, division, or state to make adequate yearly progress. Repeated failure by a school or division to make AYP will result in state intervention and progressively stiffer sanctions.

Fortunately, Virginia, because of the strong foundation put in place by the SOL program, is in a far better position than almost all other states to implement the law. And Virginia has made substantial progress in raising student achievement, even without the “get tough” tools available in other states.

For one thing, Virginia already is employing many of the intervention strategies required under the federal legislation. The commonwealth’s lowest performing schools undergo academic reviews and must develop school improvement plans to increase student achievement. These schools also must adopt instructional programs in English and mathematics that have proven records of success.

An examination of testing data reveals the progress Virginia has made in raising the achievement of students whose academic performance traditionally has lagged. For example, 59 percent of African-American students in grade 3 passed the SOL math test last spring, compared with only 40 percent in 1998. Seventy-four percent of African-American students in grade 5 passed the English writing test last year, compared with 45 percent in 1998.

The success of inner-city schools like Morningside Elementary School in Roanoke and Tidewater Park Elementary School and Roberts Park Elementary School in Norfolk demonstrate how creativity and determination on the part of principals and teachers can make a difference. All of these high-poverty schools are either fully accredited or have met the state standard for progress toward full academic accreditation. Other inner-city schools in Norfolk and elsewhere have made significant progress in raising student achievement in English and mathematics. These schools are beacons of hope, for the communities they serve and for our society as a whole.

The gains in student achievement at high-poverty schools in Virginia haven’t come easily. Intensive and varied instruction, before- and after-school tutoring, detailed analysis and tracking of achievement data, targeted remediation, outreach to parents, and the creative use of resources all have contributed to the success of these schools. At each of these schools there are teachers and a principal who believe that the results have been worth the effort.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 provides additional resources to schools that serve disadvantaged children. Virginia schools will receive an estimated \$197 million in Title One funds, which is \$46 million more than the current level. The increased federal funds will come with fewer strings attached so schools will be able to use the money to address their particular instructional needs. The Reading First Initiative contained in the act will provide Virginia schools with an additional \$17 million. This infusion of new federal money will help Virginia expand its early reading intervention program to ensure that children are able to read at grade level by the third grade.

This fall, the board will define what will constitute adequate yearly progress in Virginia for each year between 2003 and 2014. Ensuring that all schools and all students make

adequate yearly progress will require a sustained effort on the part of teachers, principals, superintendents, and parents. Progress will be slower in some schools than in others. Undoubtedly, there will be voices that urge retreat, particularly when the accountability measures built into the new law threaten entrenched interests. But we must not retreat. We must not forget that children are at the heart of the No Child Left Behind Act. They are worth the effort.

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